

# NOT EVEN PAST



## The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire by John Gallagher (1982)

Tweet

by *Jack Loveridge*

Based on lectures first delivered in Oxford in 1974, *The Decline, Revival, and Fall of the British Empire*, commands sustained attention today. In his sharp analysis of Britain's declining world system, Gallagher offers both a novel explanation of empire's "discontinuous decline" and a critique of contemporary decolonization theorists. He rejects as vain the pursuit of unearthing a single domestic or international motive for imperialism, concluding instead that, "All theories of the growth of imperialism have been failures." By extension, this assertion applies to theories of imperial collapse, freeing Gallagher to dismantle the idea that the shocks of the **Second World War** abruptly derailed Britain's global system. He convincingly demonstrates that the interwar years saw little agitation in domestic politics for ending empire. Party politics discouraged efforts for total withdrawal from the colonies and encouraged a sort of imperial status quo. **Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald** and his Conservative counterparts **Andrew Bonar Law** and **Stanley Baldwin** equally sustained a flexible empire during their tenures. The "official mind" of **Whitehall** propelled the empire along during these years, chiefly because the world

system supported Britain's interests and colonized peoples – and not the British public – footed the bill. Only when Britain energized the structures of empire to meet the challenges of the Second World War did empire see a resurgence that also spelled its doom.

Gallagher strays somewhat from his denunciation of a monocausal theory of imperial collapse in his assertion that empire's price tag became too much for the British public to bear during the 1940s. He admirably demonstrates domestic and international considerations that played off one another and the disadvantages of formal rule compared to a system of influence. A single smoking gun emerges, however, in the material conditions shaping public opinion within Britain. In spite of this small flaw, Gallagher successfully paints imperial decline as highly contingent upon changing economic and political circumstances.

### THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

Making History: Houston's "Spirit of the Confederacy"

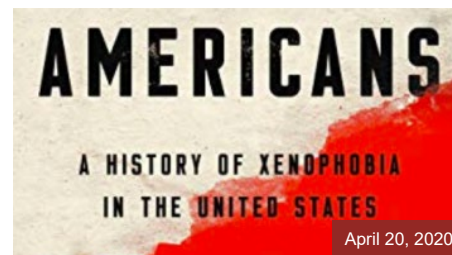


May 06, 2020

More from The Public Historian

### BOOKS

America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States by Erika Lee (2019)



April 20, 2020

More Books

### DIGITAL HISTORY

Ticha: Digital Archive Review



Photo credits

Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference. (Left to right): Rt. Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King (Canada), General Jan Christiaan Smuts (South Africa), Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill (United Kingdom), Rt. Hons. Peter Fraser (New Zealand), John Curtin (Australia)," London, 1 May, 1944.

Library and Archives Canada via Wikipedia

You may also like:

**William Roger Louis**, a UT historian of British Imperialism, wrote a piece about his professional and personal relationship with John A. Gallagher for the American Historical Association. You can read it [here](#).

Jack Loveridge's [review](#) of "Wavell: the Viceroy's Journal," along with his [review](#) of the biography of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Voices of India's Partition, Part V: [Interview with Professor Mohammad Amin](#)

Voices of India's Partition, Part IV: [Interview with Professor Masood ul Hasan](#)

Posted April 18, 2012

More [1400s to 1700s](#), [1800s](#), [1900s](#), [Books](#), [Empire](#), [Europe](#), [Periods](#), [Politics](#), [Regions](#), [Topics](#), [Transnational](#), [War](#)



More from Digital History

FILMS & MEDIA

Jojo Rabbit (Dir: Taika Waititi, 2019)



More from Films & Media

TEXAS

Spanish Flu in the Texas Oil Fields



More from Texas

19th century

## 20th Century

African American History american history Asia

Asia & Middle East book review Brazil British Empire

China Civil War Cold War Colonialism communism

cultural history digital history Early Modern Europe

Europe film gender history History of Science

immigration India Islam Latin America

Latin American History Mexico Not Even Past

Public History race religion Russia Slavery Texas

Texas History Texas History Day Transnational

Twentieth Century History United States

## US History

USSR Womens History

world history World War II

NOT EVEN PAST is produced by

The Department of History

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

We are supported by the College of Liberal Arts

And our **READERS**

DONATE

CONTACT

All content © 2010-present NOT EVEN PAST and the authors,  
unless otherwise noted

Sign up to receive bi-weekly email updates

BOOKS

FILMS & MEDIA

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

BLOG

TEXAS